# Christmas is for Grown-ups

Daniel A Lord, S.J.

That the
Christ Child
May Come to You
In the Days of Maturity
When You Need,
Understand, and Appreciate
His Faith, His Light,
And His Love,
Is the Sincere Wish
of

*Imprimatur*

✠JOSEPH E. RITTER
*Archbishop of St. Louis*
July 13, 1954

# Christmas Is For Grown-Ups

**By Daniel A. Lord, S.J.**

I SHOULD be the last to suggest that Christmas is not for children.

From the Christ Child Himself to the last little boy and girl whose eyes have lighted at the sight of a Christmas tree and whose heads have bowed in reverent love before the crib, Christmas is for the young.

But quite violently do I object to surrendering Christmas Day to children alone. They have their share, as gracious and generous a share as we can make it. But it is not their exclusive day. It is not a day made lovely by toys and lollipops and tinsel and innocent merriment.

Actually, I doubt if anyone really understands Christmas and loves it for its depth of meaning until he has reached maturity.

Christmas belongs to all mankind; but notably it belongs to grown-ups, to you and me who have passed our adolescence, who have fought or are

Copyright 1954, The Queen's Work, St. Louis 18, Mo.

fighting the grim battle of life, who move slowly not toward a rising star but toward the morning star which will fade out as life ends and the sun of eternity rises above our horizon.

Because at the crib of Bethlehem we find such contrasting characters, we sometimes say that representatives of all mankind were there. The shepherds represented the poor and the illiterate. The Magi represented the learned and, as their extravagant gifts assure us, the rich. Joseph is the descendent of the royal line reduced by Providence to the rank of village carpenter. Mary is the spotless Virgin, maidenhood at its fullest flower, now become the pattern of all mothers.

Earth is there in its varied representatives. Heaven is there in the glory of its choiring angels.

But one group is notably absent. Children will die for the Child King. But there will be no children near the manger. Artists have often enough dared to put John the Baptist, months older than the Infant Christ, into the frame of the Christmas picture. There is the probability that he never even saw the Savior until he was a man in his early thirties. That first Christmas, John was miles away from Bethlehem.

Around the crib gathered the mature, the adult, the grown-up, the angels in

their youthful but ancient immortality, the perhaps aging Joseph, men of the fields, and men of the libraries.

The first Christmas gave us the Child of our joy. For their Christmas joy, the children of the world must wait for many a long year. Christ was for grown-ups, and the part children played in the holiday season was a passive one. They knew the swords of the villainous Herod. They were occasion for the weeping and terror of their wailing mothers. They themselves died without a glimpse of star or crib or Madonna or Child.

Perhaps in a kind of compensation to the Holy Innocents we have tended to surrender so much of Christmas happiness to children.

* * * * *

FOR IT IS a tradition among us that Christmas is best loved by children and the childlike.

The favorite Christmas picture always centers around the eager face and starlighted eyes of a youngster. He may be pressing his nose against the show window of the toyshop, or pouring out to Santa his litany of hoped-for gifts, or standing in mute awestruck bewilderment under the

Christmas tree, or presenting his own small gifts to his parents, or lifting his innocence to welcome the Eucharistic Child of Christmas Communion.

We say with considerable truth that Christmas belongs either to the young or the young at heart. Thoroughly to enjoy Christmas one must be either childish or childlike.

So it is that the very old, who have returned to the simple interests of youth, love Christmas.

The sweet innocence that characterizes a convent makes it a place where Christmas thrives, almost as if, to the Bethlehem of the cloister, Christ comes with special relish.

Yet it should be remembered that one must be deeply mature before he can become really childlike. Christ promised the kingdom of God to little children. "Unless you become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." Not just Christmas but the while fulfillment of the Christian's hope depends upon innocence of soul, that faith that is the faith of little children, and rebirth in grace. All that is true, except for the fact that the struggle for innocence may be won late in life. Faith must often be wrested from long years of study and prayer, of walking almost blindly in

the footsteps of the Master, and struggling against the sophistication and cleverness of the worldling. An appreciation of grace and its youth-giving qualities comes almost slowly to most souls.

The saints grow young as they grow old. Their souls know new sinlessness as they know the advance of years. There is a lovely second childhood of the soul which, unlike the second childhood of the mind, is the result not of exhaustion but of deliberate and progressive effort, not of collapse but of striving, not of a let-down but of a rising-up toward God.

* * * * *

CHILDLIKE were the shepherds and the Magi, but for different reasons. Because of their simple life, the shepherds had reached physical maturity while retaining much of the undeveloped mentality of children. The Magi had studied so deeply and thought so profoundly, they had watched life in the streets with such perceptive eyes and studied the movement of the stars with such mathematical precision that they had grown simple — as truth is simple and God is simple.

The notes of the angels in their glorious Gloria were needed before the

shepherds ran to find the Child. Only the breaking forth of a silent star in the heavens was needed to set the Magi on their breathless journey in quest of the King. The shepherds were childlike enough to expect the Baby King to be poor like themselves, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and resting on the straw of a manger. Because the Magi knew He was a King, they turned first to King Herod that one king might tell them what surely he would know of another king. But when they found Him, humble and tiny and apparently weak, and so poor that their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh would be needed to make possible His exile in Egypt, the clarity of their childlike truth made them know a simple fact: this was the very King they sought because He was so different from themselves and so different from the kings who had ruled, upset, and tortured the world.

Shepherds and Magi were both men of maturity. And Christmas was for them.

* * * * *

BETHLEHEM was, truth to tell, full of children and full of the childish. Neither paid any slightest attention to the newborn Savior.

The children would have been upset, in all probability, had they been told that the King of Israel rested in an abandoned stable. The childish had filled the inns and flocked to the taverns and were laughing at nothing and were preoccupied with the trifles that kept them from noticing the star or doing other than shrug their shoulders when the shepherds ran through the streets, pounding on their doors and shouting, "Awake! Hurry! The King has been born."

Like the childish they later regarded the Wise Men from the East as doddering old fools. The childish always find truth silly stuff. They probably touched their temples significantly when the Magi came asking the birthplace of the King of Israel. They listened with thinly veiled smiles, and laughed at the mere idea of taking these fellows seriously.

Christmas was not in those ancient days for either children or the childish. It was for those who had grown old enough and wise enough to see the meaning of the star, the value of the truth, and the fact that the King was much more likely to be the King of heaven because He did not resemble any known king of earth.

* * * * *

PERHAPS the point that we must make immediately is a deep, fundamental, yet quite obvious one: Christmas is one of the most profound days that happen in human experience.

When we are very young, Christmas is as gay and light and sparkling as the decorations on the tree. It is measured largely in the haul we make from doting parents and kind friends. We count our presents one by one, and the day is a success precisely in proportion to the number and desirability of our gifts. The whole horizon is blotted out in the gay eclipse that is the round, red figure of Santa Claus. It is difficult for us to hear the song of the angels because the reindeer are making so much noise with their clattering hoofs, and the jingle of bells is high pitched and carries far.

As children we may be taken into the secret that it is more blessed to give than to receive, but we are hardly convinced. None of us could bear the sight of a youngster who had saved enough to buy gifts for all the family and who, tutored to believe that giving is what makes you happy, carries around his cornucopia of gifts and in return receives only a cheery, "Thank you so much, sonny."

As a very small child, I recited for our third-grade Christmas play, a high-

ly sentimental poem of the little visiting orphan at the mansion on the hill who was forgotten when the Christmas presents were given out. At night, around their grandfather's chair, the luckier children of the house brag of their presents. Someone remembers the little orphan who is tearfully described in this fashion:

"The little orphan stood apart
And watched them with an aching heart."

When finally they noticed her, they demand to know what she received for Christmas. I recited her answer in a clear, ringing, childish soprano, full of unconvinced conviction:

" 'Himself,' she answered clear and loud,

And every golden head was bowed."

I was old enough to know that she had received the Infant Savior in Holy Communion at the Christmas Mass; but I found it easy then to account for her tears and aching heart; and though I was beginning to look forward to my first Christmas Communion, I hoped that that would not be the extent of my Christmas gifts.

Christmas for children and the childish may be a matter of toys and mink coats, of an electric train or a new

Cadillac, a modern highly animated doll or stocks and bonds. The deeper significance takes a lot of adult thinking and an adjustment of one's heart to real values.

* * * * *

ACROSS their desert trails came the Magi. They had left their learned searching of the stars because an unaccounted-for star compelled them to believe that great events were afoot. They were undoubtedly bearded, and perhaps, under the weight of their wisdom, slightly bowed. But they were amazingly swift as they rushed forward right to the heart of Christmas.

What they found and accepted in the bending of their knees and the presentation of their royal gifts was the most tremendous truth of all time. This was the King of the Jews who was also the King of Heaven. This was the all-powerful God disguised in the weakness of infancy. This was divine love in search of human love. This was the climax of God's generosity; for having poured out upon the world the magnificance of creation, He now emptied Himself (as St. Paul was later to cry out), giving Himself in complete trust to the keeping of mankind.

The quick, intuitive perception of children is not enough to understand

the truth that is Christmas. Children love other children, as like are drawn to like. And when they come into contact with the crib and the Infant, something stirs within them that is a quick and tender recognition. They welcome Him as perhaps they welcomed the new baby whom mother brought home from the hospital. They smiled their approval as they do when the little fellow next door is wheeled out to take the sun. They might even recognize in the Infant a very special Child, for He is in some way responsible for all the happiness and generosity which children experience on Christmas Day, His Birthday.

It takes long prayer and much study, the facing up to mysteries beyond the most profound understanding, and the acceptance of faith which is a blend of developed humility and experience of God's wonderful dealings with His sons and daughters, before one begins to understand what Christmas really means.

* * * * *

THAT IS why Christmas belongs to grown-ups.

With a lifetime of experience we come to know God's love for each of us personally. When we have known and felt the goodness of God, we are

ready to accept the greatness of His love which gave us the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity for the life and light of mankind.

We need profound meditation on the word which is the Scriptures and a careful study of the words that have been written and spoken in explanation before we come to any slight grips with the glorious fact that this is the Word made flesh.

Christmas is the feast of a birth-in-time of the God who was begotten from all eternity. It is the feast of the great paradoxes, and paradoxes are for grown-ups. The paradoxes that have delighted the saints and the childlikely wise, Thomas and Chesterton, challenge the adult mind and set aflame the mature imagination: God now united to man; divine nature and human nature in one divine Person; the limitless bound in swaddling clothes; power grown deliberately weak; the great voice of God become the whimper of infancy; the timeless born in time; the Creator of all the world taking flesh from a Virgin; the Glory of the Heavens hidden in the shadow of the stable; Heaven itself buried in the hillside cave.

Only the adult mind begins to grasp the divine truths that lie with the Babe in the manger; and the mature intelligence is fired to pursue the wonders of

these truths up and on, forward and backward in the light of faith and the inner revelation of sanctity and grace.

* * * * *

THE CHILDISH, whatever their years, push aside this magnificent manifestation of God's truth as unimportant, almost annoying. Let the Child remain a simple human child. Let Christmas be the birthday merely of the greatest man of history. Explain away the angels. Smile a little at the excitement of the Magi. Mysteries are not for modern men. If truth is not instantly apparent, it is not worth pursuing. A paradox is nonsense, and what the human mind cannot fully understand is to be shrugged off contemptuously.

The mature stand before the baffling and inspiring truth of Christmas with reverence and wonder, feeling the challenge and determined to search further. If the truth were too easy to understand, it would be no greater than the human mind that caught it at once, not vast as the infinite God. If one could exhaust the significance of Christmas in a few easy symbols, this would not be the inexhaustible God who will challenge the intelligence and delight the will for an endless eternity. Our God, whether He be the God of the beatific

vision or the God of the manger, is vast, inspiring, far out of reach of quick glance and instant understanding. He merits on earth long, happy study; He will receive from us in eternity the tribute of an eternal crescendo of perception, appreciation, and love.

Children may look upon the Infant Christ and love Him instinctively and eagerly. The children may turn from the mystery of the Incarnation to the trifles and excitements and adornments of the Christmastide. The mature minds of the adult man and woman wake in the Christmas dawn to something like a prelude to the eternal vision which they will know when they look, not on the gently disguised Babe of Bethlehem, but upon the glorious vision of the heavenly Lamb of God.

* * * * *

YOUTH likes excitement. Children like noise and bustle. Boys and girls like toys that clatter and engines that clank and games that demand great bursts of strength to the accompaniment of much shouting and clamor. Their dolls must cry or squeak. Their building blocks are less fun when they slowly rise than when they fall to the ground in a great crash. Balls are fun when they hit the glove with a smack, are rapped with the sharp

crack of a bat or the ping of a racket, when they resound to the blow of a fist or the kick of a foot.

The adult comes to know the charm and graciousness of peace.

"Peace on earth," cried the angels in what was one of the first Christmas greetings. Only the grown-up sighs an "Amen" of complete understanding and agreement.

The childish, petulant dictator dreams of war and through war of the accumulation of power and trifles. The mature man or woman knows that peace is the atmosphere in which the soul grows and the nations flourish, the arts reach their fullest realization, science switches from destruction to the enrichment of life, and men face each other in friendship and love and not with hate in heart and destruction in hand.

In the thousand prayers and requests of the children and the childish there is no thought of asking for peace. Only the man who has known the ugliness of hatred, the paralyzing destruction of war, the corroding effects of dislikes and enmities, the severance of friends and the bitterness of estranged relatives; only the person who has known the confusion of doubt and the wreckage of sin, cries out in quick response to the angels' promise of peace.

The adult longs for peace in his own soul, the peace of sanctifying grace and the friendship of God.

The mature man is sick of the confusion of modern teachings and asks for the calm of God's clear truth.

The man or woman who knows history knows too the futility of war, all wars, and yearns for peace in our time and for all future time.

The dream of a family of nations sends us back into our own families aware that peace first must be the atmosphere of the home before it becomes the atmosphere of the earth.

The great modern philosophies which have, on a foundation of hate, threatened the overthrow of all that began with the first Christmas, are so clearly known today that Christmas has had a great re-acceptance across the civilized world. We must have peace. We cannot live if there is even one more war.

* * * * *

SO ONLY the grown-ups know the meaning of the peace of the Christmastide, which must become the peace of all human souls, the peace of all homes, the peace of all nations, the peace of mankind. Without peace, we are hopelessly lost.

And Christmas is a time of peace. The Christ Child was born into a world which, for a moment, laid aside its endless battling, and tasted a brief interlude of peace.

The Babe lying in the manger is the same Person whose later wish for His followers would be, "My peace I give you, my peace I leave you."

The carol of the angels becomes the hope of world councils and the dream of a united mankind.

This is not the peace of suspended war, of armistices itching to break out in fresh explosions, of enemies loving peace far less than they dread what secret weapons the other side may possess. It is a peace that looks up to the Father of the Christmas Child who dwells in His peaceful heavens. It is the peace of the Christ who conquered the world of bloodlusting enemies without trace of weapon in His hands. It is the peace of united hearts and hands clasped in friendship and treaties honored and weapons destroyed.

It is the peace that pervades the environs of the tabernacle and follows the reception of Holy Communion. It is the peace that radiates out from the confessional and shines in the expectant face of the dying saint. It is peace as the angels have known it since the rebellion of Lucifer ended in his ex-

pulsion, the peace of the eternal courts of God, where sin cannot enter, and hatreds and envies are unknown, and all share the common treasure of God's bounty and possess the universal citizenship of the city of God.

This is the peace of Christmas, and it can be won and treasured only by the adult.

* * * * *

WHEN we think of Christmas, we think of Christmas gifts. When we think of Christmas gifts, we think of children and their delight.

Yet when we think of the truest of Christmas gifts, they too belong to grown-ups.

There come transitions in the lives of all of us, when the Christmas gifts that lately seemed incredibly important suddenly lose their value. The gifts of rattle and tinkling bell, or be-ribboned cape and knitted boots would insult a small boy or girl. They belong to infancy. The dolls and simple games, the primitive construction toys and windup mechanical trains do not even momentarily gain the attention of the young adolescent. Adolescence is over when the loud colors and exaggerated clothes are regarded with sudden distaste, when an album of the latest hot

(or cool) records is regarded with alarm, while a sudden interest flares for "useful presents," once regarded with contempt.

A person is growing up when he begins rightly to assay the true value of gifts. It is interesting to judge the age of the recipient from a quick inventory of the clusters and piles of presents lying under the strange Christmas tree . . . the gamut running from the totally useless to the highly practical, from things to be rattled and batted about to things to be worn with dignity and treasured with care.

Yet the truest gifts of the Christmastide belong only to the grown-ups whose mature mind can evaluate them properly and cling to them with gratitude.

It takes long, prayerful, studious years properly to prize the Gift of Gifts, the Child Himself.

It takes more than a little thinking to break down the word "Christmas" into its component parts of Christ's Mass, and to know that the return of Christ in the Christmas Masses is more important as a gift to mankind than the combined content of Tiffany's, the General Motors' showroom, the First National Bank, and Spaulding's.

* * * * *

ONE HAS GROWN wise when, looking around the Christmas dinner table, the gift of family unity and love and devotion, the year-long service of a mother, the eagerness of children to measure up to the sacrifices of parents, the unselfish labors of a father, outweigh and outlast the most extravagant gifts of a single day.

One has gained the viewpoint of God when faith becomes the most basic of gifts, and love is the thing we give to God and our fellow men, and the sinlessness and grace of the human soul outmatch the most expensive furs and the most costly clothes and jewelry.

When one can say, "Thank you, God!" for health and friends, for the richness of books and the charm of music, for the endless, limited-to-no-season beauty of the earth, for the perfume of flowers and the gaiety of young life, then one has reached a maturity capable of rightly valuing the gifts of the Christmastide.

For the truest gifts of the Christmastide belong to all the year — God's Providence, the endless fertility of the earth, the ceaseless activity of human minds, the warmth of friendship, the creative power of love, the grace and salvation of Christ, the tender protection of Mother Mary, membership in

the great Communion of Saints which manifested itself on the first Christmas Day.

* * * * *

SO WITH ALL our hearts we can hope and pray that Christmas will mean much to our children. We can even envy them a bit the spontaneous joy with which they rush to pick up and hug the trifles that can be put into stockings or hung from trees.

God loves their simplicity, as He must forgive over and over again the thoughtlessness and wrong values of the childish.

But Christmas belongs to grown-ups, who have come to know that Christmas is just the exclamation point in an endless story of God's goodness to His children of earth and of heaven.

Christmas is for those who can see the angels and think of the heaven from which they came.

It belongs to those who, hearing the song of peace, struggle and strive to make peace the atmosphere of civilization.

It belongs to those who love truth as the greatest gift of the mind and grace as the fairest adornment of the soul,

and who know that both come from the hands of the Infant King of Christmas.

Christmas is for those who have long practiced the Christlike virtues or regained their innocence through their acceptance of His law and His love.

Christmas in its sweet, transparent, easy-to-see, within-quick-grasp meanings may belong to children.

The Christmas of Christ, true God and true man, Eternal Lover born in time, Star for the Wise and Teacher of the Learned, Answer to Problems and Fountain of Peace, belongs to the mature, the adult, the grown-up.

May that Christmas be yours and mine.

* * * * *

THE QUEEN'S WORK
3115 South Grand Boulevard
St. Louis 18, Mo.

Printed in U. S. A.